

EPISODE 4: DOMINIC MORAN

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:01

Ever wondered what it would be like studying Spanish at the University of Oxford? Sit in on my conversations with Spanish tutors to find out what's so fascinating about the literature they teach, why they love teaching it, and why they think you might love it too.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:14

Hi Dominic.

Dominic Moran 0:15

Christy, hello.

Christy Callaway-Gale 0:16

Hello, how you doing?

[CONVERSATION FADES OUT]

Dominic Moran 0:18

I'm Dominic Moran. I'm the Spanish tutor at Christ Church but I also deal with Spanish for Brasenose college as well. I was an undergraduate at Trinity College in the now, I suppose, technically remote past—the late 1980s and early 1990s. Partly, in fact largely, as an experience of what I did as an undergraduate, and the tutors who taught me, I developed an interest in Spanish American literature. I've always tended to be interested in particular authors, rather necessarily than, sort of, themes or periods. And it was a consequence of that, that I went on to do my doctorate on the Argentine writer, Julio Cortázar, about whom we're going to hopefully speak.

Christy Callaway-Gale 1:05

So we're going to be speaking about a short story today by Julio Cortázar. What's the name of the text? And maybe you could tell us just a little bit about Julio Cortázar?

Dominic Moran 1:15

Well, this is...in fact the title of the text is in some ways quite problematic...not in Spanish, well even in Spanish it's slightly problematic or slightly unusual. It's called 'Continuidad de los parques' and it's been translated as 'Continuity of Parks', which of course doesn't sound English at all. But it's by an Argentine writer, a very famous Argentine writer, called Julio Cortázar, whose dates are 1914-1984 and who is the most important and most influential Spanish American prose writer of the 20th century, in both the fields of the novel but certainly also in the field of the Spanish American short story...in which he really was a sort of pioneer.

Christy Callaway-Gale 2:08

Great. And so what's the basic plot of the short story that we're going to be speaking about today?

Dominic Moran 2:14

Well...when I was, sort of, thinking about how I might go about summarising the plot, the words 'spoiler alert' kept flashing through my head, because this is a very, very short story. It's a story about a person who, at it were, gets so absorbed in the reading of a novel, that

something quite nasty seems to end up happening to him, precisely as a consequence of his having got so caught up and lost in the reading of the novel. And what happens is revealed, at least partially, in the final words of the story which give the reader, I think it's fair to say, quite a shock.

Christy Callaway-Gale 2:54

And why did you want to speak about this text in particular?

Dominic Moran 2:58

Well...in some ways, of course, if I say because it's short that isn't as flippant as it might sound. Using an economy of means, verbal means, in order to produce a maximum of impact is really central to the craft of the short story writer, particularly the short story writer in modern times. The short story has a very long history and for great chunks of that history the short story wasn't necessarily very short at all. But the great practitioners in modern times, to think of one known to many, Hemingway was a specialist in very short and very oblique stories and Cortázar was another such writer. So I thought that the best way to test his, as it were, credentials as a short story writer was by choosing, as it were, an extreme example of the genre because, in a way, an extreme example of this particular genre ought to be an entirely representative and useful example, and I can think of none better than a short story which is just a single page long.

Christy Callaway-Gale 3:59

Brilliant. So let's talk now about the short story more generally as a literary form. What's the definition of a short story, would you say, and how different is it from a novel, for example?

Dominic Moran 4:11

Oh goodness me. Well, in some ways, I was dreading that question because it's one that of course demands to be answered but has no definitive answer, because like nearly all literary genre over the centuries, what people considered a short story has changed quite...radically really. One thing it's perhaps worth thinking about is that the short story is perhaps the oldest of forms which became literary forms because...ever since people have been telling each other stories...they've been telling each other short stories, of course, and we go all the way back to preliterate societies; we think—perhaps slightly conventionally, we need to be cautious about that—but of course of people sitting round the fire at night, telling each other tales. And of course, what you tell is a tale which is short, to the point, which doesn't digress, which doesn't wander, which is full of tension, excitement, maximises impact. And I suspect that the...what we would now call aesthetic values, which were central to short storytelling before anyone thought of writing short stories down as what we now call literature, remain central to the genre...now.

Christy Callaway-Gale 5:28

So the short story that we're looking at today is written by an Argentinian author. Is there anything in particular that characterises the Spanish American short story in comparison to short stories written in other parts of the world?

Dominic Moran 5:42

Again, this is a very good question, and a very important question...and another one to which there's no straightforward answer. If you read more of Cortázar's stories, you'll realise that he was a tremendously cosmopolitan writer. His stories, both in terms of the subject matter and the themes in particular, are by no means confined to either Argentina, Latin America more broadly, and that's partly to do with his own personal circumstances and history as a writer...partly as a consequence of his own, as it were, literary and cultural cosmopolitanism. Now, of course...as with all genre, there are some examples of it which are more obviously tied to the local context and the local setting and circumstances, than others. I'll take one example, in fact very famous example, and it's the Peruvian writer Ricardo Palma, who in the late, or mid

to late, 19th century—I think he started to produce stuff about 1863, I think is the date—produced volume after volume of what are called *Tradiciones peruanas*: very interesting stories which are, in some ways, partly chronicle, partly fiction, partly vignettes, partly reworked history, which in short form revisit (as the title suggests) sort of, episodes, figures, crucial moments, folktales, etc., from the history of Peru. But then you have other writers, perhaps most famously of all Jorge Luis Borges—another Argentine writer, fifteen years older than Cortázar and a very important influence on his work—who was conspicuously and quite deliberately cosmopolitan. And his outlook is very, very different. In some ways, the first wave of short story writers who one might consider as a, sort of, phenomenon, which were the so called Modernistas of the late 19th and early 20th century—they were more famous for their poetry—and, again, they were very cosmopolitan. Many of them were directly influenced by literature coming from France in particular, the so-called *conte fantastique* was a huge influence on many of them. And so, it's a form which is, on the one hand of course very...strictly defined in terms of length and dimensions, but at the same time it's very capacious. And of course, that's good news for readers because it can deal with a great deal of subject matter, so, in some ways, I don't want to give a definitive answer; some short story writers in Spanish America are obviously Spanish American in their focus, others are much broader.

Christy Callaway-Gale 8:22

You mentioned before that the short story has a long history, but was there any particular moment when the short story was popularised in Spanish America, would you say?

Dominic Moran 8:34

One thing...whenever we talk about literature, it's always worth remembering that, sort of, behind the scenes, as it were, we tend to get...not lost in ideas but absorbed in...ideas...when we read books, and we tend to forget that they are also physical objects which are produced—not just books either, of course—in particular sets of circumstances. In Spanish America, it's worth remembering that many of the Spanish American countries that we recognise now only came into being in the early decades. In fact, 1810 is given as the first date for the beginning of the Spanish American independence movement. For many, many years, these countries were busy fighting themselves to a standstill and trying to, sort of, establish themselves as, sort of, functioning states. Illiteracy was of course, and entirely understandably, rife, given that they were emerging from several centuries of colonial rule in which most people had...no access to, as it were, learning, etc. And publishing was not a big thing, to put it simply. And so you have a, sort of, large...barren period in which very few people got to write. You had to have the money to do it, you had to have the time, you often had to self-publish because, of course, there weren't that many printing presses round the country. It's towards the end of the 19th century, really—when literacy rates are growing, urban centres are growing and larger urban centres are always where literature is first disseminated, there is a...more, sort of more widely disseminated press, magazines are set up, journals, etc.—that people start to publish stories in these journals, because it was one of the only ways in which authors were going to get a wide audience back in those days. And that's what I said before, you see this wave of Modernista writers—the most famous of whom is the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío but there are plenty of others too—who publish lots of stories in journals and that's really when the genre becomes, as it were, popularised and recognised as a widely, sort of, practiced genre in the continent, I would say, and that continues well into the 20th century.

Christy Callaway-Gale 11:05

So let's move on now to speak about Cortázar, the author of the short story we're going to look at in some detail. Did Cortázar have specific views on how a short story should be written, or what sort of effect a short story should be trying to create?

Dominic Moran 11:22

There's one very important lead with Cortázar. I'm going to say, yes, and then qualify that yes slightly, or at least trying and illustrate it a bit. Cortázar has a very important predecessor in the form of the American writer Edgar Allan Poe, who's often referred to as the father of the modern short story. And he wasn't...he was by no means the only influence on Cortázar. Cortázar is a tremendously, or was, excuse me, a tremendously cosmopolitan writer, who...and it was to his immense credit and the advantage of his work that he would take influences wherever he found them and build on them and change them and, as it were, do things with them differently in his own work. But Poe, in 1842, in a very famous review he wrote of a book called...a book of short stories by his fellow American Nathaniel Hawthorne, a book called *Twice Told Tales*, used some of that review to, as it were, lay out the aesthetics of the short story as he conceived of it. And in fact, Cortázar, basically almost one hundred years later, translated the complete works of Poe—they were published by the University of Puerto Rico in the mid-50s and are still available. And I think the principles laid out by Poe in that very important review remain at the heart of Cortázar's own short story writing. He expanded on them, he phrased them or described them differently. I actually think the story we're going to talk about is in some ways Cortázar using the short story form to think about some of the things that Poe said in that famous review.

Christy Callaway-Gale 13:05

Is there anything that characterises Cortázar's short stories, in terms of the writing style?

Dominic Moran 13:12

It's interesting because in his first book of stories, which is called *Bestiario*, which is published in 1951, Cortázar has a rather different style in many of those stories to the one he would develop later. Many of those stories begin with bizarre events, which he tries in a way to naturalise by treating them in a matter of fact fashion. So for example, in one famous story called 'Carta a una señorita en París' (Letter to a Young Lady in Paris) there's a narrator who, at least he tells us, keeps vomiting up little furry rabbits, for no apparent reason. But the narrator isn't surprised by this and after a while the reader ceases to be entirely surprised by it, although I don't think we ever cease being somewhat disturbed. In another story from the same collection, there is a tiger wandering around a country house in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, and all of the characters accept this as just a fact and develop various signalling systems to warn each other when the tiger is in their proximity. I won't say what happens in that story other than that it isn't pleasant. What Cortázar would go on to do...he was no less interested in the things which were, as it were, disturbing, disquieting, or worse, but he tended to approach them in a much more, apparently, matter of fact fashion. If you read his prose style, the prose is, in a sense, unobtrusive; it's actually quite oral almost in style; it's this...sort of, conspicuously unliterary; it's designed, as it were, very often—and 'Continuidad de los parques' is a very good example—to put the reader off our guard and, of course, to make us forget, in many respects, that what we're reading is a work of literature. His intention, as it were, to immerse us in the narrative without our even being aware that someone is telling us a story, and he uses very particular sort of methods to do that, but they're so subtly deployed that we barely notice them in his best stories and I think this is an example of that.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 15:16

A big part of studying Spanish at Oxford is looking at texts in a lot of detail. So we're going to focus in now on Cortázar's short story 'Continuidad de los parques' so we can analyse it a bit more closely.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 15:29

So maybe now you can give us a more detailed account of the plot of the short story before we do a close reading of it?

Dominic Moran 15:35

I'm going to...do what Cortázar does in the story and be as brief and shocking as possible. This appears to be a story—I say appears to be because it's...it has its complexities—about a man who becomes so absorbed in the reading of a novel and so uncritical of his reading that—and here of course something very strange appears to occur—by the end of the story, he appears to be murdered by one of the characters in the novel he's reading. And this experience of the fictional character in the story is, in some ways of course, disturbingly mirrored in our reading of the story itself, because of course we become completely absorbed in this story, to the extent, I think, that we forget that it's a story actually about a man reading, so that by the end, in a sense, we are caught short as well and we realise that we put ourselves in exactly the same position as the protagonist, and we can see what happens to him and I think we almost find ourselves, as it were, looking round just to check no one's coming at us by the time we finish it. So, of course, why this happens and what we're supposed to make of it are the key questions, but that's what the story is all about. It seems to be a story about a man who pays a very, very heavy price for reading too casually and uncritically.

Christy Callaway-Gale 16:57

So is this short story written in the first person, second person, or third person?

Dominic Moran 17:02

It's written in...third person, in the free indirect style, in the sense that we are...we begin with the perspective—filtered through a third-person narration—of this man as he sits down to read the novel. But as the story progresses, and Cortázar does something very clever in that he gradually shifts the perspective, or the focus of the narrative, so that we lose sight of the scene with which the story begins (i.e. that of the man reading the novel) and we're gradually induced to enter what look like the pages of the novel that he's reading, themselves. And, in fact, in the end of the penultimate paragraph, when we get the phrase 'empezaba a anochecer', it's entirely unclear which of the two worlds that sentence belongs to, whether it's that of the man reading the novel, with which the story began, or that of the novel in itself, in which the two lovers are planning the murder of the unfaithful wife's husband. And then, in fact, the final paragraph of the story could easily belong to the novel itself. It's no longer clear exactly what it is that we're reading, so Cortázar very, very subtly, as it were, changes perspective as this narrative advances.

Christy Callaway-Gale 18:25

And what's the prose style like in this short story? Is it the same throughout all of these shifts in narrative perspective?

Dominic Moran 18:32

The prose style, again, as I was saying before, is very, as it were, unliterary, except in some of the passages that refer to the text of the novel. Interestingly, I think the sort of novel that this guy is reading—and, by the way, it's interesting to see the character Cortázar picks as his protagonist—strikes me as being one of those, sort of, romantic...overblown melodramas and some of the descriptions we get...from the novel itself seem to confirm that. But the style of the story is deliberately unobtrusive. Cortázar does not want style to get between the reader and what's actually happening. And of course, again, that allows us to be, as it were, sucked into the narrative pretty quickly, just as the reader of the novel is. The style is in no ways difficult, it's not conspicuously stylized, except when it refers to the text of the novel early on. And then things change, I think, in the concluding paragraph of the story. The last paragraph could easily belong to the novel itself. How do we know this? Well, there are no references anymore to the man reading, whether direct or by implication. You'll notice as well that in the

opening paragraph, when the man reading the book is described, Cortázar uses the imperfect throughout and that puts the reader at a certain distance. So you have: '[p]rimero entraba la mujer', 'ahora llegaba el amante', '[a]dmirablemente restañaba ella la sangre', 'él rechazaba las caricias', etc. And the use of the imperfect in this descriptive fashion reminds us that what we're getting is the experience of the novel, filtered through the consciousness of Cortázar's protagonist. Notice though, in the concluding paragraph, that the imperfections disappear and now we get preterites describing single actions. And...now we're very, very close to the characters in the novel, rather than to the initial protagonists of our story. And in fact, as that last paragraph proceeds, the pace of the narration picks up. It's also worth noting that, in the concluding 'sentence'—and I've used that in inverted commas—there are no finite verbs at all. Cortázar gets rid of them so as to speed up, as it were, the pace of the narrative...and, as it were, hurtle us towards the dramatic conclusion. So again, we get caught up. We're very close now also, not to the consciousness of the reader, but to the consciousness of the protagonist in the novel who's about to commit this murder. So things do change quite considerably in that last...the concluding paragraph, but because, of course, the prose style itself is so unflashy, and because Cortázar is so careful in the way he does this, we don't actually notice this going on the first time we read the story, we're just caught up in it, I think.

Christy Callaway-Gale 20:31

Now we've spoken a bit about the prose style, are there any striking images that you want us to focus on within the short story that you think are important for us to talk about?

Dominic Moran 21:42

Images, figurative language, I think would distract Cortázar from his purpose here. Instead, if you like, he uses very subtle, what turn out to be, motifs. So all of the elements which reappear in the concluding lines of the story—the 'ventanales', the 'respaldo del sillón', the 'terciopelo verde', the head of the man resting on it—have all been mentioned in the opening lines of the story in a way which doesn't particularly draw the reader's attention; we pass over them because we have no idea, initially, that they're particularly significant at all. And again, Cortázar, as it were, is almost unconsciously getting the reader to, sort of, absorb these references which then take on a great deal of significance at the end of the story. Where you do get figurative language, by the way, in this story, it comes from, or it alludes to, the novel that the protagonist is reading, and I think it's rather...it's deliberately overblown; it belongs to the world of perhaps the slightly trashy, the slightly melodramatic sort of romance-thriller. I don't think we're supposed to understand that the reader in the story is reading a great work of literature here. In fact, of course, his life is taken up with hard work, business, etc., and he reads purely for escapism. That's what's interesting about it, it's the sort of escapist understanding of reading and of literature, which is the cause of him paying the price that he pays at the end.

Christy Callaway-Gale 23:18

And can you pull out any quotations from the short story that give us a sense of the way that the protagonist views reading or the sort of life that he leads?

Dominic Moran 23:29

There's one very interesting word here. I'll begin with that. A couple of sentences in, it says: 'Esa tarde, después de escribir una carta a su apoderado'—his 'attorney', or 'lawyer'—'y discutir con el mayordomo'—so this is a character who also has a sort of 'butler', or a 'man', as they used to say in the worst sort of English novel—'una cuestión de aparcerías'. This is a word which means...refers to the joint ownership of land. The word 'finca' earlier on, again—you would also find the word *estancia* in Argentina—it's not quite clear, of course, where this story is set, I think that's deliberate. But it is clear that the protagonist is a sort of wealthy landowning type. He has a large estate, he has people working for him, he's wealthy, and that is basically, you know, his existence. The reading of the novel is to distract himself from all that and there are a number of things which are...which make that clear. For example, he is

'arrellanado en su sillón favorito', so, as it were, 'flopped back in his favourite armchair'. And it says, of course, 'la ilusión novelesca lo ganó casi en seguida', so 'as soon as', as it were, 'he relaxes back, he lets the narrative', as it were, 'wash over him uncritically and becomes absorbed in the story'. And the next line, as it were, reinforces that: '[g]ozaba del placer casi perverso de irse desgajando línea a línea de lo que lo rodeaba'. So that means 'he enjoyed the almost perverse pleasure of gradually', as it were, 'detaching himself from his surroundings as he read'. Notice also, by the way, there's a very nice detail here which proves to be ironic later on. It says, when he sits in his 'sillón favorito', it says it's 'de espaldas a la puerta que lo hubiera molestado como una irritante posibilidad de intrusiones'. So he deliberately, as it were, turns the armchair away from the door, precisely because he doesn't want anyone intruding upon the act of reading. And again, we don't notice this at the start, but that's precisely the action which brings the...narrative to such a dramatic close. So yes, I think there's plenty in that first paragraph that I think give you a very clear picture of what sort of person this is and what his, as it were, preferred reading material and reading habits are.

Christy Callaway-Gale 26:04

And so why do you think Cortázar focuses on the art of reading in this short story?

Dominic Moran 26:11

When Edgar Allan Poe wrote that review I mentioned a while back, he was very keen to make a distinction between the short story and the novel and he said a number of things about the short story. First of all, he said the experience of reading the best short stories should be closer to the experience of reading poetry than to...than that of reading extended prose. He also said that the short story, as he understood it, ought to be read in a single sitting from which the reader, as it were, never emerged; it had to be completely immersive, once you sat down to it, you had to be dragged in and then you would go, as it were, to the end. So, in some ways, of course, Cortázar is putting Poe's principles into quite dramatic practice here and...he espoused those principles very much. But Cortázar, when he was writing novels in particular and when he was meditating on reading more generally, wanted to cultivate suspicious, critical, inquisitive readers who never took at face value what a text gave them, who always wanted to, sort of, burrow and dig beneath the surface of the narrative to see what might be lurking, as it were, beneath. And this is where there seems to be a sort of paradox, or contradiction of sorts, here, because he writes a short story about a man reading a novel which is completely immersive—as he says the short story should be—but by the time we get to the end of the story, we nevertheless, by dint of our having been immersed in it, seem to commit exactly the same sin, as it were, or error, that the protagonist of the story commits. Which is very interesting, isn't it? Because in some ways Cortázar is writing a story which exactly fits his great predecessor's precepts, and yet leads this quite disturbing conclusion: the more immersed we become, the more vulnerable we seem to become, as it were, the more suggestible we seem to become. So I think what Cortázar's actually doing here is writing a story...in a way to, sort of, test that theory and to look at some of its consequences.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 28:30

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Christy Callaway-Gale 28:43

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Christy Callaway-Gale 28:51

This podcast was created by Professor Ben Bollig, produced by me Christy Callaway-Gale, and brought to you by the Sub-faculty of Spanish at the University of Oxford. Special thanks goes to the tutors that participated and the Taylor Institution Library.

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